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Focus on feelings. Parental emotion socialization in early childhood

Pol, L.D. van der

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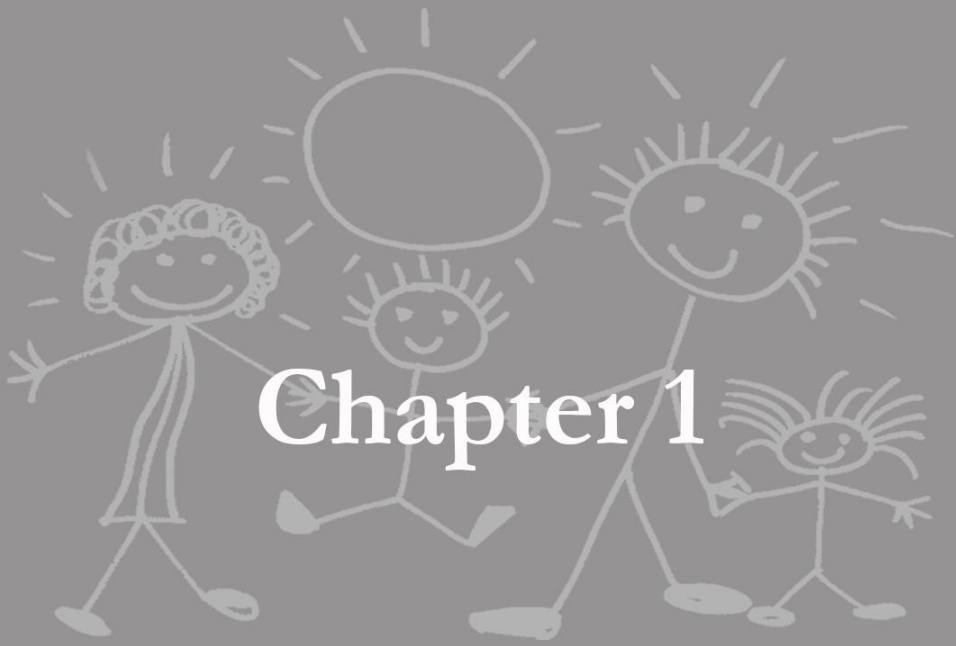


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Author: Pol, Liselotte Daphne van der

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**General Introduction:
Parental Socialization of Children's
Emotions**

One of the key challenges of early childhood is the development of emotional competence (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; Saarni, 1999). Emotional competence refers to the ability to correctly identify and understand emotions in oneself and in others, the expression of emotions in contextually and socially appropriate ways, and the capacity to inhibit or modulate emotional behaviors such as aggression in favor of interpersonal goals (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Saarni, 1999). Emotional competence is, in turn, an important prerequisite for the development of empathy and prosocial behavior (e.g., Denham et al., 2003; Izard et al., 2001), which are both essential skills to form harmonious close relationships with others. There is ample evidence that intrinsic factors such as temperament and developmental level play a role in the way children tend to regulate and express their emotions (Calkins, 2004; Schore, 1994). Nonetheless, parental emotion socialization (i.e., parents' reactions to child emotions, their own emotional expressiveness, and parent-child discussions of emotions) is key to promoting and channeling children's emotional and social competencies in accordance with prevailing social norms in society (e.g., Baker, Fenning, & Crnic, 2010; Eisenberg et al., 1998).

In their frequently cited review on early child emotion socialization, Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) provide a heuristic overview of the various factors that are thought to shape parents' emotion socialization behaviors, distinguishing cultural factors, contextual aspects, parent characteristics, and child characteristics. Cultural factors, including display rules about emotions, and contextual aspects like the potential harm of an expressed emotion determine the appropriateness of an emotional expression, and are thus thought to directly contribute to parents' emotion socialization behavior in specific situations. Further, parent characteristics (e.g., emotional wellbeing) and child characteristics (e.g., developmental level), are likely to exert a robust influence on the development of parents' emotion-related parenting styles. Though Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) do not explicitly mention this in their heuristic model, family characteristics such as ingrained interaction patterns are likely to play a unique role in the way parents socialize emotions in their children, above and beyond the effects of individual parent and child characteristics (e.g., Wong, McElwain, Halberstadt, & Kazak, 2009).

To date, a large body of research has demonstrated the (prospective) link between parental emotion socialization and child social-emotional

development (e.g., Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Garner, 2003). However, there are still important gaps in our understanding of individual differences in parents' emotion socialization behaviors and the potential consequences of these differences for children's emotional and social development. This dissertation aims to provide more insight in the role of family, parent, and child characteristics in early child emotion socialization and child social-emotional functioning at toddler and preschool age.

Emotion socialization

In the literature three aspects of parenting can be distinguished that directly influence children's emotional understanding and behavior: (1) the way parents respond to their children's emotions, (2) the way parents express their emotions in the home, and (3) the way parents discuss emotions with their children (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Regarding the first aspect, both theory and research indicate that parental sensitivity to child emotional cues plays an important role in children's adaptive social-emotional development (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Kochanska, 2002; Mesman, Oster, & Camras, 2012). Parental sensitivity refers to the parent's ability to perceive child signals, to interpret these signals correctly, and to respond to them promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974). Research has shown that parents who respond in a sensitive manner to negative child emotions like anxiety, for example by comforting the child, directly foster an optimal level of arousal in their children as evidenced by a decrease in heart rate and smooth return to positive affect (e.g., Conradt & Ablow, 2010; Haley & Stansbury, 2003). Further, parental sensitive responsiveness to child distress during infancy has been found to predict better self-regulation skills in toddlers and preschoolers (e.g., Leerkes, Nayena Blankson, & O'Brien, 2009). Although to our knowledge there are no studies that exclusively focus on parents' responses to *positive* child emotions, studies on parental sensitivity during enjoyable activities such as play suggest that parents' awareness of positive feelings in their children and their warm and supportive reactions to such feelings stimulate children's emotion regulation skills in stressful situations (e.g., Calkins & Johnson, 1998; Leerkes et al., 2009). Another way in which parents socialize their children's emotion regulation and emotional expressiveness is through their discipline strategies in response to children's non-compliant and

oppositional behaviors (Smith, 2004), which are often accompanied by negative child emotions such as anger. More specifically, there is ample evidence that parents who use mild power-assertion during limit-setting and give clear directions to their children (a pattern referred to as authoritative parenting), foster their children's adaptive self-regulated behaviors like the inhibition of aggressive responses (Karreman, Van Tuijl, Van Aken, & Dekovic, 2006), as well as children's ability to correctly understand emotions in themselves and others (e.g., O'Reilly & Candida, 2014).

The second emotion-related parenting practice, i.e., parents' emotional expressiveness in the home, provides children with important information about display rules regarding both positive and negative emotions and is likely to lead to imitation by the child (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Indeed, there is ample evidence that children mimic their parents' emotional expressiveness from infancy onward (e.g., Beebe et al., 2010; Dickerson Peck, 2003; Kogan & Carter, 1996). Furthermore, the way parents express their emotions can shape children's ideas about normative emotional experiences and expressions, thus influencing their schemas of emotions and the evaluation of their own and others' emotional behaviors (Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997; Eisenberg et al., 1998). There is also evidence that parents' emotional expressiveness is strongly tied to the way they respond to their children's emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). For example, parents who tend to frequently express positive emotions at home are also more likely to respond in a sensitive and accepting manner to their child's emotions (e.g., Zhou et al., 2002), indicating that parental expressiveness may amplify the influence of other emotion-related parenting practices. The direct and indirect effects of parents' emotional expressiveness on children's social-emotional development may be most clearly visible in families characterized by parental psychological difficulties, as symptoms of psychopathology often reflect disturbances in emotion processing and self-regulation (Kring & Bachorowski, 1999). The link between parents' emotional wellbeing, their emotion socialization behavior, and children's social-emotional functioning will be discussed in more detail in the third part of this chapter.

The third parental emotion socialization practice, i.e., the way parents discuss emotions with their children, starts playing an important role in children's development of emotional understanding and social-emotional competencies from toddlerhood onward (Howe, 2013). Discussions of

emotions give parents the opportunity to scaffold their children's social-emotional development (Malatesta & Haviland, 1985). For example, during discussions parents can explain to their children how to recognize emotions in oneself and others based on facial and bodily cues. Further, parents can provide their children with explicit information about the causes and consequences of specific emotions. In a similar vein, during discussions parents have the opportunity to teach their children how to prevent eliciting negative feelings in others as well as how to respond to others' negative emotions in a socially accepted manner, thus supporting children's prosocial behavior. The frequency with which parents (mostly mothers) discuss emotions with their children has been found to be positively associated with children's own use of emotion talk (e.g., Jenkins, Turrell, Kogushi, Lollis, & Ross, 2003), their ability to identify and understand emotions correctly (e.g., Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2013; Perez Rivera & Dunsmore, 2011), and their later social skills (e.g., Garner, 2003). In addition to parents' frequency of discussing emotions with their children, the degree to which parents elaborate on an emotion, for example referring to different aspects of the emotion or involving the child's own experience in the discussion, is likely to bolster children's adaptive social-emotional functioning (Thompson, 2002). Indeed, the level of elaborateness of parental emotion talk has been found to be particularly important for the development of emotion understanding and perspective taking skills in young children (e.g., Laible, 2004; Laible & Song, 2006).

There is ample evidence that the way parents respond to their child's emotional cues as well as the way parents tend to express their own emotions in the presence of their children are relatively stable parenting characteristics over time (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2003; Horvath Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Michalik et al., 2007). Parents' levels of emotional expressivity are closely tied to their ability to regulate their positive and negative emotions, which at least partly reflects automatically invoked neurobiological processes (Goldsmith & Davidson, 2004). Further, although the content and elaborateness of parents' verbal responses to children's emotional cues may change as children grow older, the levels of supportiveness of their responses are thought to reflect a relatively stable view on the appropriateness of emotion expression (Gottman, Fainsilber Katz, & Hooven, 1996). In contrast to the first two types of parental emotion socialization, the way parents talk about emotions

with their children may be highly subject to change as children's ability to recognize, understand, and verbally reflect on emotions increases substantially during the toddler and preschool years (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986; Saarni, 1999). However, research tapping into the development of parental emotion talk is very scarce.

The role of gender in socializing child emotions

Parent and child gender. Both theory and research indicate that parental emotion socialization varies by parent gender and child gender. According to social role theory fathers are traditionally seen as the breadwinners of the family, while mothers are considered as caretakers (Lamb & Lewis, 2010). Although fathers have become increasingly more involved in childrearing in the last two decades, mothers are still the primary caregivers in most families, even in countries with relatively high gender equality like the Netherlands (Huerta et al., 2013). A more traditional role division may leave fathers with fewer opportunities than mothers to perceive and respond to their children's emotions as well as to discuss emotions with their children. In addition, from the perspective of sex role theory fathers and mothers may differ in their parenting characteristics as a result of their internalized gender role standards regarding goal-orientation and social behavior (Holt & Ellis, 1998). In most Western cultures men are expected to focus more on interpersonal dominance striving and to be more assertive than women (McIntyre & Edwards, 2009). In contrast, women are expected to be more relationship-oriented and nurturing than men. In line with these gender roles, there is evidence that women are better at decoding emotional expressions than men (Hoffmann, Kessler, Eppel, Rukavina, & Traue, 2010), which may give mothers an advantage over fathers in responding to child emotions and involving emotions in parent-child discussions. Indeed, there is evidence that fathers are less aware of their children's emotions than mothers (Gottman et al., 1996; Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002), and that mothers talk more about emotions with their children than do fathers (e.g., Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Zaman & Fivush, 2013).

In addition to goal-orientation and social behavior, gender roles convey explicit rules about the behavioral expression of emotions in males and females (Brody, 2000). Males are often expected to display more disharmonious emotions like aggression that assert their own interests over

others', whereas females are expected to display more submissive emotions like sadness that promote harmonious social interactions (Brody, 2000; McIntyre & Edwards, 2009). As a result, internalized gender role standards may not only lead to different emotion socialization strategies in fathers and mothers, but may also stimulate parents' gender-typed emotion socialization of girls and boys. Indeed, parents have been found to tolerate the expression of disharmonious emotions like anger more in boys than in girls (e.g., Chaplin, Casey, Sinha, & Mayes, 2010; Martin & Ross, 2005), while the expression of submissive emotions like sadness is accepted more in girls than in boys (e.g., Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Zeman, 2007). Parents also tend to talk more about emotions in general with their daughters than with their sons (e.g., Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995).

Consistent with the traditional role division between fathers and mothers, social role theory suggests that fathers are more likely than mothers to socialize boys' and girls' emotions in accordance with traditional gender roles to sustain the advantages in power and social status for males (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). However, findings on this topic are mixed. Some studies find empirical support for this hypothesis (e.g., Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010), whereas other studies do not (e.g., Fivush et al., 2000), which makes it difficult to draw conclusions on the potential combined influence of parent gender and child gender on early child emotion socialization.

To date, the role of parent and child gender in emotion socialization has been studied mainly in United States samples and to a much lesser extent in West-European samples. Although gender stereotypes about male-typed and female-typed behaviors appear to be quite robust across Western cultures (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2009), data on the gender gap (e.g., gender differences in health, life expectancy, access to education, etcetera) indicate that gender equality is larger in West-European countries than in North American countries (World Gender Gap Index, 2013). Because the level of gender (in)equality in a country may influence gender roles and parents' gender-typed parenting behaviors, research with samples from West-European countries is needed to examine gender-typed emotion socialization in societies with relatively high gender equality.

Gender configuration in the current family. Parents' emotion socialization behavior during parent-child interactions may not only be influenced by the gender of that particular child, but also by the gender of

other children in the family. That is, the sibling gender configuration in a family can shape parents' gender-typed expectations of their children's characteristics and behaviors, which can affect the way parents treat each individual child (Conley, 2000). For example, according to the normative climate hypothesis, in families with more boys than girls parents' expectations of their children are biased toward more masculine behaviors and characteristics in all children (Powell & Steelman, 1990). Alternatively, from the perspective of a child-driven effect, i.e., children eliciting specific parenting behavior through their own characteristics and behaviors (Bell, 1968), it is conceivable that the gender combination of siblings can influence parents' differentiated reactions to the gendered behaviors of their daughters and sons. For example, it could be that parents of mixed-gender siblings show more gender-differentiated emotion socialization behaviors than parents of same-gender siblings because parents of mixed-gender siblings have to cope with gender-based differences in child behavior in everyday family interactions (McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 1999).

In line with both theoretical propositions several studies have shown that the sibling gender configuration in a family is associated with parents' emotion-related parenting practices, including parental warmth and acceptance (e.g., McHale, Updegraff, Jackson-Newsom, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000). In addition, there is ample evidence that the gender combination of siblings is related to children's social-emotional development, including the development of behavior problems and prosocial behavior (e.g., Kier & Lewis, 1998; Miller & Maruyama, 1976; Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006). However, to date results on the role of sibling gender configuration in family processes are mixed. For example, some studies have found evidence that children in all-boy families receive lower-quality parenting compared to children in other family types (e.g., McHale et al., 2000), while other studies suggest that mixed-gender sibling dyads experience less optimal family interaction patterns than same-gender dyads (e.g., Poonam & Punia, 2012; Tamrouti-Makkink, Semon Dubas, Gerris, & Van Aken, 2004). In addition, most studies examining this topic are relatively old, which offers us a perhaps outdated view on the potential impact of gender of all siblings in a family on early child emotion socialization and children's social-emotional functioning.

Gender configuration in parents' families of origin. Similar to the potential role of the gender combination of their children, parents' own

family background, including the number of male or female siblings in their family of origin, may influence their current (gender-typed) emotion socialization behaviors. Both theory and research on the intergenerational transmission of behavior indicate that one's experiences within the family context as a child shape one's social-emotional functioning in adulthood through social learning (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Goodman & Godlib, 1999; Van der Voort et al., 2014) and neurobiological adaptations (Champagne, 2008; Polan & Hofer, 2008). Regarding social learning, two important mechanisms of transmission include observational learning (i.e., parents and siblings serving as role models for emotional and social behavior) and ingrained interaction patterns with parents and siblings that shape one's schema's of self and others (Goodman & Godlib, 1999; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). From the perspective of family system theories both mechanisms of social learning in the family are likely to be influenced by structural family characteristics (McHale & Lindahl, 2011), including the gender combination of the siblings. Consistent with this idea, studies on gender development suggest that growing up with (predominantly) brothers or sisters influences the development of gender-typed ideas and behaviors in middle childhood (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003), which have been found to be significant precursors of future gender role development (for a review see Martin & Ruble, 2010). For example, in a study by Rust and colleagues both girls and boys with brothers were found to be more masculine and less feminine in their interests, play activities, and characteristics than children with sisters (Rust, Golombok, Hines, Johnston, & Golding, 2000). These findings indicate that having grown up with brothers and/or sisters may shape fathers' and mothers' internalized gender role standards and, accordingly, their gender-typed emotion socialization.

Regarding neurobiological mechanisms of intergenerational transmission, there is evidence that early childhood experiences modulate levels of gene expression as well as the neuroendocrine system functioning, which affect various social-emotional behaviors (Champagne, 2008; Polan & Hofer, 2008). When studying the potential effect of the sibling gender combination in parents' family of origin on their current (gender-typed) emotion socialization behaviors, it may be particularly interesting to study variations in parents' circulating testosterone levels. Research suggests that the steroid sex hormone testosterone is positively predicted by the proportion of male siblings in the

family (Tapp, Maybery, & Whitehouse, 2011), and there is evidence that higher levels of circulating testosterone constrain emotion processing skills in adulthood (e.g., Ronay & Carney, 2012; Van Honk et al., 2011). In addition, both theory and research suggest that circulating testosterone is related to quality of parenting (e.g., Bos, Hermans, Montoya, Ramsey, & Van Honk, 2010; Weisman, Zagoory-Sharon, & Feldman, 2014). However, it remains unclear whether higher levels of testosterone predict less (e.g., Weisman et al., 2014) or more optimal parenting behavior (e.g., Bos et al., 2010), and to what extent the influence of testosterone on parenting differs between fathers and mothers.

Parental psychological wellbeing and emotion socialization

Various theoretical frameworks propose that the way parents socialize emotions in their children is closely tied to parents' own emotional wellbeing (e.g., Dix, 1991; Goodman & Godlib, 1999). According to Dix' affective model of parenting, parents' emotions are at the heart of both adaptive and maladaptive emotion-related parenting behaviors with positive and empathic emotions promoting parental warmth, patience, and responsiveness to child signals, while negative emotions like anger and frustration are thought to lead to parental inattention, avoidance, and hostility (Dix, 1991). In a related vein, the developmental psychopathology perspective proposes that parents who experience negative emotions like anxiety and sadness expose their children to the maladaptive thoughts (e.g., 'I am helpless') and behaviors (e.g., social withdrawal) that go together with these feelings (Goodman & Godlib, 1999). As previously noted, the association between parents' own emotional wellbeing and their emotion socialization behavior might be most evident in families in which one or both of the parents suffer from psychological difficulties, which often reflect disturbances in emotion processing and emotion regulation (Kring & Bachoroswki, 1999). For instance, parents with symptoms of psychopathology have been found to express more negative emotions in the home (e.g., Cummings, Cheung, & Davies, 2013; Kaitz & Maytal, 2005), and to be less sensitive to their child's emotional cues (e.g., Zerkowitz, Papageorgiou, Bardin, & Wang, 2009). There is also evidence that mothers with psychopathology symptoms are more likely to reiterate negative feelings and stressful experiences with their children compared with mothers without these symptoms (e.g., Grimbos, Granic, & Pepler, 2013).

In addition to the link between parents' psychological difficulties and their impaired emotion socialization behaviors, the associations between each of these parental characteristics and children's maladaptive social-emotional functioning have been well documented (e.g., Breaux, Harvey, & Lugo-Candelas, 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Grimbos, et al., 2013; Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2005). These findings suggest that parental psychological problems may affect children's social-emotional development *via* impaired emotion socialization strategies. There is some evidence supporting this mediating role of parental emotion socialization. For example, in two studies mothers' depressive symptoms predicted lower levels of responsiveness to child emotions, which in turn was negatively related to children's emotional wellbeing (e.g., Feng, Shaw, Skuban, & Lane, 2007; Silk et al., 2011). However, most studies did not formally test a mediational pathway. In addition, from the perspective of family system theories according to which family members exert a continuous and reciprocal influence on each other's daily functioning (Cox & Paley, 1997), it is conceivable that parents' psychological difficulties not only affect child development through their own emotion socialization, but also through their partners' emotion socialization behaviors. There is increasing evidence that one parent's psychopathology symptoms have an impact on the other parent's parenting behaviors (e.g., Beestin, Hugh-Jones, & Gough, 2014; Malmberg & Flouri, 2011; Ponnet et al., 2013), but it remains unclear whether this effect is either negative or positive. That is, in some studies parents showed less supportive parenting as a function of their partner's psychological problems (e.g., Malmberg & Flouri, 2011), while in other studies parents appeared to compensate for the lower-quality parenting of their emotionally troubled partner (e.g., Beestin et al., 2014). These mixed findings could be due to the different types of samples that were examined as parental psychological difficulties may have different consequences for family interaction patterns in community-based and clinical samples. Further, the impact of parental psychopathology symptoms on other family members may vary for different types of psychopathology. In this dissertation we examine the potential influence of fathers' and mothers' internalizing *and* externalizing psychopathology symptoms on both parents' emotion socialization in a community-based sample.

Aim and outline of the dissertation

The general aim of the studies presented in this dissertation is to provide more insight in the role of family characteristics (gender combination of siblings in current family and parents' family of origin), parent characteristics (gender, implicit gender stereotypes, circulating testosterone, psychopathology symptoms), and child characteristics (gender, developmental level) in early child emotion socialization and children's social-emotional development. The potential mechanisms underlying individual differences in parental emotion socialization behavior and, in turn, child social-emotional functioning that are examined in the studies presented in this dissertation are shown in Figure 1. In Chapter 2 the degree to which fathers and mothers elaborate on basic emotions with their daughters and sons is examined longitudinally from toddlerhood to preschool age. In addition, the role of implicit gender stereotypes in fathers' and mothers' use of emotion talk is examined in this study. Chapter 3 reports on the role of the gender combination of siblings in two-child families on fathers' and mothers' sensitivity to child signals, parents' discipline strategies in a limit setting situation, and children's social-emotional behaviors at 1 and 3 years of age, respectively. Chapter 4 focuses on the potential influence of the proportion of male siblings in fathers' and mothers' family of origin on their current gender-typed parenting characteristics, including parents' gendered cognitions, their gendered use of emotion talk with their toddlers, and, more generally, the gendered role division between fathers and mothers. In addition to a direct relation between parents' family background and their gender-typed parenting characteristics, an indirect effect through parents' circulating testosterone levels is tested. In Chapter 5 a mediation model is tested, using a longitudinal design, in which the link between fathers' and mothers' psychopathology symptoms and preschoolers' social-emotional functioning is mediated by the degree to which both parents elaborate on negative emotions with their children. Finally, in Chapter 6 the main findings of these empirical studies are reviewed and integrated. Limitations, suggestions for further research, and theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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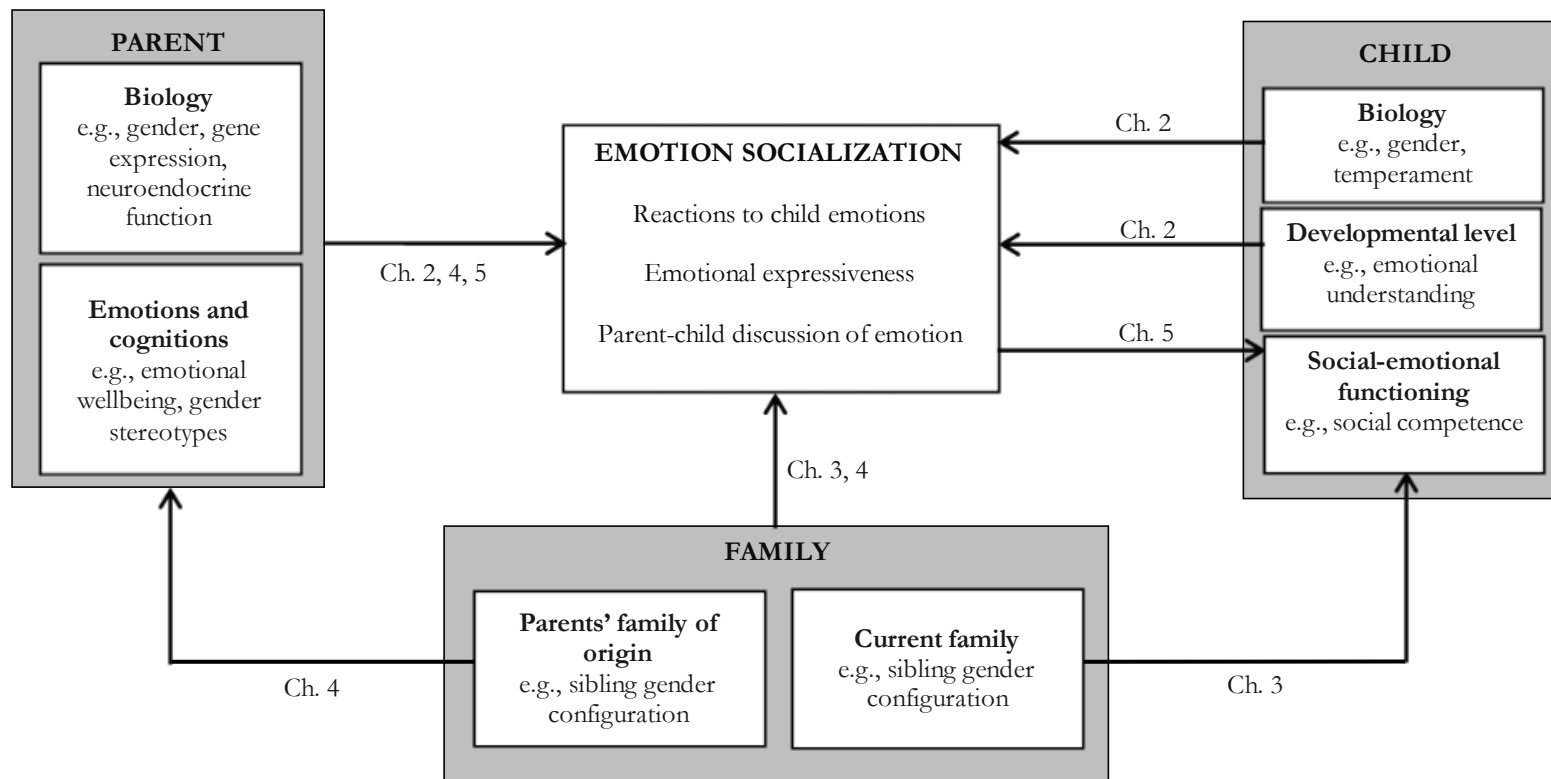


Figure 1. Model Underlying Individual Differences in Parental Emotion Socialization and Child Social-Emotional Development.

Note. The numbers refer to the chapters focusing on the specific topic.